



Reaction of Children to a Disaster

How do children typically react to disasters?

People of all ages share many of the same feelings and reactions to a disaster. However, the needs of children require special attention. Typical reactions for children of all ages include:

- Fears of future disasters
- Loss of interest in school
- Returning to behaviors the child has already outgrown
- Problems sleeping and night terrors
- Fears of events associated with disaster.

What are some age-specific responses?

Preschool (ages 1-5): Children in this age group are easily upset when changes happen to the safe world that they know. Because they usually don't have the coping skills to handle high levels of stress on their own, they generally look to family members for comfort. Children in this age group may have a major fear of being abandoned, and children who have lost family members or other things they love will need special reassurance.

Typical responses include:

- Thumb sucking
- Bed wetting
- Fears of the darkness or of animals
- Clinging to parents
- Night terrors
- Loss of bladder or bowel control, constipation
- Speech difficulties (e.g., stammering)
- Loss or increase of appetite.

Some things that may be helpful are:

- Encourage children to express themselves through play.
- Provide reassurance through talking and comforting through hugs.
- Give frequent attention.
- Encourage children to talk about the loss of pets or toys.
- Plan calming, comforting activities before bedtime.
- Allow changes in sleeping arrangements for a short time, such as letting children sleep with a light on or with the door open, sleep in another room, or having a parent stay in the room until children fall asleep.

Early childhood (ages 5-11) In this age group, it is typical for children to regress, or return to behaviors they have already outgrown. The loss of pets or prize objects is especially hard for them to handle.

Typical responses include:

- Irritability
- Whining
- Clinging
- Aggressive behavior at home or school
- Obvious competition with younger siblings for parents' attention
- Night terrors, nightmares, fear of darkness
- Avoiding going to school
- Acting shy or uninterested in friends
- Loss of interest and trouble concentrating in school.



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**Some things that are helpful are:**

- Patience and tolerance
- Play time with adults and friends
- Discussions with adults and friends
- Lowered expectations for performance at school or home (making sure it is understood that the change is temporary and the normal routine will come back)
- Structured but undemanding responsibilities
- Practicing the safety measures to be taken in future disasters.

Pre-adolescent (ages 11-14): The reactions of friends are especially important to children in this age group. The child needs to feel that his/her fears are normal and shared by others. Parents and guardians should focus on lessening uneasiness and fears and possible feelings of guilt.

Typical responses include:

- Trouble sleeping, loss of appetite
- Rebellion at home
- Refusing to do chores
- Problems in school (e.g., fighting, withdrawing, loss of interest, attention seeking behavior)
- Physical problems (e.g., headaches, vague aches and pains, skin eruptions, bowel problems)
- Loss of interest in friends or social activities.

Some things that may be helpful are:

- Group activities geared toward getting back to routines
- Activities with children from the same age group
- Group discussions about relieving the disaster and rehearsing actions for future disasters
- Structured but undemanding responsibilities
- Temporary relaxed expectations of performance at school or at home
- More one-on-one time and affection.

Adolescent (ages 14-18): Adolescents focus most of their activities and interests around their friends and classmates. They tend to be most upset by the disruption of the activities of their friends and not being allowed to participate as an adult in community efforts.

Typical responses include:

- Physical problems caused by being upset or stressed (e.g., rashes, bowel problems, stomach aches)
- Headaches and tension
- Appetite and sleep problems
- Amenorrhea (loss of menstrual cycle for girls)
- Agitation or decrease in energy level
- An uncaring attitude
- Irresponsible and/or delinquent behavior
- Struggles with parents over control
- Trouble concentrating.

Some things that might be helpful are:

- Encouraging participation in the community rehabilitation or recovery work.
- Encouraging participation in social activities, athletics, clubs, etc.
- Encouraging talking about the disaster with friends, extended family members and significant others.
- Temporarily lowering expectations for the level of school and general performance.
- Encouraging, but not forcing, discussion of disaster fears within the family.

Where can I find help?

For additional assistance, contact your local public health department, community mental health center, a counselor or a mental health professional.

The information in this fact sheet was adapted from a publication by the Center for Mental Health Services of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

